

## THE YOUTH ATTITUDE TRACKING STUDY (YATS) IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: A METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

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### Purpose and Overview of the Study

The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) began in 1975 and has grown into a complex telephone survey of 16-24 year-old men and women with nationwide representation. The central concept measured by YATS is called propensity, which is the stated likelihood that a youth will enlist in the military or one of the military services in the next few years. Research has shown that propensity predicts actual enlistment, making the propensity estimate a closely monitored measure.

For some years, propensity has stood at a historical level of about 30 percent of young male youth, but in 1992 and 1993, dropped by over 50 percent for African American youth, historically the group with the highest enlistment propensity. This trend and drops in propensity for other youth groups caused some concern among the military recruiting community.

The concern about falling propensity and the desire to understand the phenomenon more fully were the impetus for the start of the YATS in-depth follow-up interviews. The study was designed to explore two broad content areas: (a) the context and process of young men's career decisions and (b) the specific consideration of military enlistment as a career choice. The methodology was designed to meet several criteria:

- Conduct interviews with a nationally representative sample of respondents to the 1995 Fall YATS administration;
- Gather in-depth information; and
- Conduct the interviews and collect data in a cost-efficient manner.

These criteria were implemented through development of a 45-minute telephone interview. The interview, although structured, allowed respondents to present the natural history of their own decision-making process, reflecting the events, constraints, interpretations, and insights unique to their individual experience. Interviews were conducted by telephone to gain national representation and balance among urban, suburban, and rural interview respondents without the expense of face-to-face interviews conducted across the country.

Nationwide telephone interviews also were lower in cost than in-person interviews. To select and interview a representative sample of YATS respondents in person would have been prohibitively expensive. Initially, some members of the research team expressed reservations regarding the efficacy of in-depth telephone interviews. Among the

questions asked were whether sufficient personal rapport could be established over the telephone to yield data of the quality desired. The study demonstrated that telephone methodology was more than sufficient to collect good quality in-depth information.

To concentrate on the primary issue of military propensity within the career decision-making process, we focused on YATS respondents whose characteristics placed them in the "prime military recruiting market," those youth who were of greatest interest to the recruitment community. One hundred twenty interviews were conducted among youth roughly balanced by race/ethnic and propensity groups, based on their responses to the 1995 YATS interview. Balance among respondent demographic characteristics of age, educational level, work status, and region of the country was also maintained. A guiding principle in qualitative research is representativeness among respondents; a requirement of qualitative data analysis is that there are sufficient numbers of respondents to analyze by category. Therefore, target quotas of interviews were set to ensure that this principle was met, rather than to reflect the existing distribution of 1995 YATS respondent characteristics.

## Participant Selection

**Participant pool.** The annual YATS survey is designed with a sample frame of males and females ages 16-24 with no previous military experience. The participant pool for the in-depth interview study was developed to include only individuals with the following characteristics (all other respondents to the 1995 YATS survey were excluded from the pool):

- Males;
- Ages 17-21;
- White, black, or Hispanic race/ethnic groups; and
- High school seniors, degreed graduates, or college students.

Based on their responses to several questions on the 1995 YATS survey, youth were grouped into four categories representing their interest in military enlistment and assigned to a named propensity group. YATS respondents with other patterns of response to the propensity questions were excluded from the follow-up study pool. Enlistment propensity was an essential element of the study because we wanted to explore previous contentions (Nieva, et al., 1996) that propensity is a dynamic and changeable decision state. The definitions of the propensity groups were:

"Joiners": Category that research has shown to be most likely to join the military among YATS respondents. Respondents gave positive responses to the 1995 YATS unaided propensity question, as well as a positive response to at least one of the aided propensity questions.

- "Non-Joiners": Category that research has shown to be least likely to join the military. This group of youth responded negatively to both unaided and aided propensity questions and said they had never considered military service.
- "Shifters": Indicated in responses to the 1995 YATS questions that they had changed their minds about military service. Respondents reported that they

seriously had considered military service in the past, but their current propensity is negative.

- "Fence-Sitters": A more ambiguous propensity group. Respondents made at least one somewhat positive propensity response to the 1995 YATS questions and also made negative responses.

**Participant selection.** From the in-depth interview participant pool, cases were generated to meet a balanced quota among the three race/ethnic and four propensity groups. The data collection target was a total of 120 interviews, subdivided into 40 interviews, each with white, black, and Hispanic youth. Within each race/ethnic group, 10 interviews were conducted with members of each propensity group. Within race/ethnic and propensity groups, cases were balanced in rough proportions by the respondent characteristics of interest:

- Ages 17-21;
- Educational level (high school senior, high school graduate, post secondary/graduate student);
- Work status (employed, unemployed-looking for work, unemployed-not looking for work); and
- Region of the country (Northeast, South, North Central, West).

In order to maintain the balance of respondent characteristics, cases remaining in the participant pool were resorted (balanced) on a weekly basis during the period of data collection. For example, many black YATS respondents resided in Southern states and many Hispanic YATS respondents resided in California and Southwest states, and, therefore, their proportions were high among the participant pool. When the balance of respondents in one area became too great, we gave greater priority to contacting cases in other areas of the country.

## **Data Collection**

The data collection began on December 15, 1995, and was completed for white and black youth by March 15, 1996. Interviews with Hispanic youth continued until May 3, 1996. Six senior and mid-level researchers conducted the interviews. The total number of completed interviews for the study was 120. (This number was not set until we analyzed the data for emerging themes well into the interviewing. The consistency of the themes within the analytic subgroups determined the number of interviews to be completed.)

The numbers of completed interviews by race/ethnic and propensity groups were:

Propensity Group					
Race/Ethnic Group	Joiners	Non-Joiners	Shifters	Fence-Sitters	Total
White	9	8	9	12	38
Black	10	13	8	9	40
Hispanic	10	10	11	11	42
Total	29	31	28	32	120

**Interview design.** Data were collected in a structured interview lasting, on average, 45 minutes. Each respondent was asked the same set of questions, but was allowed to "tell his story" in his own order and depth with guidance from the interviewer. Three-quarters of an hour was judged to be the maximum duration we could keep respondents on the telephone, but it also allowed the respondent sufficient time to "warm-up" to the topic and the interviewer, explore several areas in depth, and close the interview. All interviews were taped, with permission, and transcribed. Each interview was summarized in writing by the interviewer.

Interviewers also had access to pertinent YATS responses to familiarize themselves with respondent characteristics prior to the interview and to provide specific information used in several in-depth interview questions. Among these were personal characteristics (age, date of birth, state of residence, educational status, work status, military experience of family members) and responses to questions about military propensity and career plans (intention to join each of the military services, college or work plans).

**The interview protocol.** The protocol was divided into several sections:

**Post-high school career decision:** This section began with a general discussion of the youth's current school/work/personal activities. The youth was asked whether he was making decisions about his future and how far in the future he was planning. Plans vis-a-vis work, school, or military enlistment drawn from YATS responses were revisited and explored, with specific focus on sources of information and influence, the point at which the decision was made, and the concrete steps that had been taken toward a goal.

**Entering the military:** The YATS responses to questions about intent to enlist were reviewed. We explored whether these views had changed since the YATS survey (or even as a result of participation in the survey). Current intention to join or not join the

military was explored from the perspective of how the young man reached his decision, who influenced him (parents, relatives, friends), the nature of the influence (information, guidance, role modeling), how contact with a recruiter played into the decision, and what circumstances might have changed his mind.

**Images of the future with military and nonmilitary:** The youth's image of military life was explored and compared with images of postgraduate schooling or civilian jobs. Specific views of boot camp were discussed and compared with later military service. The concept of military lifestyle and whether the youth believed the military would change him as a person, as compared with a civilian job or postgraduate schooling, was also explored. The youth was questioned about sources of images and information, including relatives and friends who were currently serving or had previously served in the military. The circumstances of any recruiter contacts were also recounted.

**Accuracy of information:** Short-answer questions were asked at the end of the interview to assess the youth's knowledge about the enlistment process and military service; military jobs and working conditions; and compensation and benefits, including college tuition benefits, job training, and promotions.

The 45-minute structured interview protocol was developed specifically for telephone administration. The aim of the protocol was to provide a format through which the respondent could reflect on, explore, and describe the story of his career decision-making process with emphasis on how this related to propensity toward the military. As with many important life events, individuals are often unreflective regarding the process they experience as events transpire. Thus, the protocol offered several different entrees to the interview topics so that the youth could respond to points that were most salient to his situation. Some repetition was built into the protocol to allow the respondent to return to important points upon reflection or as details were recalled. Interview questions were general in content and, thus, adaptable to different types of careers, different points along the career choice path, and differing ability levels of respondents to articulate the process.

Protocol sections were organized to follow a natural flow of conversation by introducing more general areas first, such as current career plans, followed by more specific topics such as military propensity. However, the order of the discussion could be modified by the interviewer if the respondent organized his responses differently. Within sections, the same questions were posed to each respondent. Probes were used liberally to encourage the respondent to expand on his response or to focus the discussion on specific items of interest.

The protocol was reviewed by content and policy experts, tested in cognitive laboratory interviews, and pretested by telephone with several 17-21 year-old youth. Pretests concentrated on intended content, clear and understandable language, and natural flow.

**Contact procedures.** Sample members were contacted either by a project interviewer, who attempted to conduct the interview at that time or schedule the interview for a specific time, or by an interviewer from Westat's Telephone Research Center, who scheduled the interview for a specific date and time. This information was forwarded to

an assigned project interviewer.

At the initial contact with the respondent, the purpose of the interview -- to talk again with YATS respondents about their military and career plans in more detail -- was explained to the youth. For youth under age 18, we assumed permission if a parent or other adult did not refuse the youth's participation in the interview. Selected youth were told that they would receive a \$15 remuneration for participating in the project after completing the 45-minute interview.

Uniform contact rules were developed to ensure systematic treatment of potential respondents for the several different interviewers. Call attempts to reach anyone at the given telephone number were set at a maximum of seven. These were placed over different "time slices": two daytime, three evening, and two weekend (one Saturday and one Sunday). After it was determined that the telephone number was a working number and the respondent was at that location, the maximum number of household contacts made to reach the respondent was five. A household contact meant that the interviewer spoke to someone in the household. The maximum number of appointments made and broken by the sampled youth was set at three. The case was closed if the maximum was reached in any category.

### **Approach to Data Analysis**

The first step in data analysis was to develop broad analytic questions based on the research questions. Discussions among the interviewers throughout data collection were held to review emerging analytic themes. Following completion of the interviews, interviewers reviewed their own transcripts for analytic themes and patterns of differences.

The major portion of the analysis was conducted by one senior researcher in two main iterative stages. First, all transcripts were reviewed to identify major themes and patterns associated with the set of research questions focusing on the youth's decision-making processes and styles. The transcripts were examined for general flavor and tone and to discern systematic regularities and variations by factors thought likely to influence decision making. These included age, race/ethnic group, region, urban versus rural residence, socioeconomic status, and college attendance. At this point in the analysis, research questions about military propensity were secondary, serving as a kind of "subtheme" that informed the examination of broader questions about decision making.

Procedures conformed to commonly accepted standards for analyzing qualitative data, following an approach that might best be described as a type of inductive grounded theory. The concept of grounded theory was first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, and more recently elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1990):

"A grounded theory is...inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents...it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon.. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant

to that phenomenon is allowed to emerge." (p.23)

Following the grounded theory approach, emerging insights and hypotheses on decision-making processes and styles were checked and rechecked in subsequent iterative rereadings of critical portions of the transcripts. Interviewers' summaries of individual interviews also contributed to the analysis, especially in identifying specific cases for closer scrutiny.

Although inductive in the sense of not following a hypothesis-testing mode, the analytic process was not theoretically "naive." The research questions, transformed into analytic questions, formed the structure in which the interview data were analyzed. For example, a critique of rational decision-making theory was not an intended main part of the analysis, but the data spoke very powerfully to these and related theories of late-adolescent development. Consequently, this theory emerged as a logical framework in which to present interview data on career decision making.

The second "broad sweep" through the transcripts reexamined them more specifically for what they could reveal about the meaning of propensity to join the military and underlying psychosocial and familial bases. This was further analyzed for variance across the four predetermined propensity categories. This second sweep, although informed by the first round of analysis, also involved independent rereading of major portions of the transcripts, following essentially the same procedures of grounded theory-building described above. In this round, analysis focused on "unpacking" the meanings of propensity and identifying distinct configurations of images, social and informational bases, and interpretations of military and civilian life associated with the different propensity groups.

## Summary

The qualitative in-depth interviews with YATS respondents employ a methodology that deepens the meaning and usefulness of the data collected in the ongoing YATS study. By building on YATS data through these additional cost-effective telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample, the current picture of military propensity among young men in today's prime recruiting market may be expanded.

## References

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